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United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

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FEB 21 2002

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TO: The Secretary
FROM: WHA ^{for} Otto J. Reich LG
SUBJECT: Press Freedom in Venezuela

The Inter-American Human Rights Commission's Executive Secretary and Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression Santiago Cantón released February 14 a report that criticized the Chávez regime's treatment of the Venezuelan media. This report called for an investigation of recent violence against journalists and expressed concern that such acts threaten the human rights of all Venezuelans. Cantón urged the GOV and Venezuelans in general to be more tolerant of media scrutiny and criticism, and warned the GOV that public criticism of the media by government officials could be seen as intimidating acts that limit freedom of expression.

Cantón's assessment tracks closely with Embassy reporting that Chávez is pursuing a deliberate campaign of private pressure and public conflict to intimidate the media into self-censorship. Reported tactics range from tax probes and prosecution under a truth clause of the constitution to threatening calls and attacks, such as the January 31 bombing outside Caracas' tabloid *Así es la noticia*, and violent protests by Chávez supporters outside Caracas daily *El Nacional* on January 7. The Embassy and Spokesman have publicly condemned these attacks and the Ambassador has met with the media to show USG support.

The government's controversial draft broadcast media content law, which requires the media to publish "truthful information" and dramatically expands libel and slander standards, could undercut Chávez's thin majority in the National Assembly by sparking defections of his loyalists. Several draft versions of the measure are currently circulating.

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